

Chapter Fifteen -- Little Brown Jug

It was in a tavern that Uncle Lish Patrick killed the man that had wronged his wife while he was off to war, an' it was over a drink that somebody stabbed Cousin Tom Stafford to death at the Flat Gap. I guess the little brown jug had somethin' to do with a lot of the things that went on in the hills.

When we sang about it, we said the little brown jug was full of gin, but I guess mighty few of us had ever seen any gin, except the ones that went off to the city. For even if the automobile wasn't around, an' the roads were bad, people went places in those days, same as now, an' same as they had when the only way was on hoss-back or in a flatboat.

Sometimes if two fellers just had one horse between 'em, they'd ride an' tie, as we called it then. Jim'd start walkin' an' John'd start out on the horse, ride him about three miles good an' fast, an' then tie him to a tree by the road. Then John'd start on walkin'. By the time Jim caught up to where the horse was, it'd be rested, an' he'd ride it about three miles past where he caught up with John, an' tie it an' walk. An' so on.

By the time one feller caught up to the horse it'd be rested, an' could go on fast; an' when he got off it, he'd be rested an' could walk fast. That way two could go maybe forty miles apiece in a long day, with one horse.

Still, back in the mountains, what you saw was mostly either

home made wine or corn liquor. An' it was over a pint of corn liquor that Tom was stabbed.

He an' a couple of other men had gone in together on a pint of whiskey, an' went out to thumb it an' drink it. They'd figure out how far down on the bottle was a man's share, an' he'd mark it with his thumb an' drink down to that. But one of the others claimed Tom had slipped his thumb down, an' the fight started. After he was stabbed in the heart Tom ran an' jumped a high palin' fence, they said, an' fell dead on the other side. Some say it couldn't be so, but I don't know. I've never seen a man stabbed to death, though I have seen a few shot.

It wasn't over liquor that Lish Patrick shot Buck Gensing, as I said, but over what he'd done while Lish was away.

Buck was a soldier, too, or sort of a guerrilla, an' for a while after Uncle Lish got back home after the war, Buck kind of lay low. Uncle Lish was ready for him any time, day or night, an' finally saw him in the tavern, an' walked up an' pulled his gun.

When Buck turned around he said, "Lish, don't shoot me." An' that was the last thing he ever said. But it preyed on Uncle Lish's mind a good deal, an' he often said he wished he'd given him a chance to talk before he died.

After the shootin' Uncle Lish went to the sheriff to give himself up.

"Mr. Patrick," the sheriff said, "Gensing's such a bad man, an' has done so many bad things, that we're glad to be rid of him. Just don't you pay no mind to it." An' that's all that anybody ever said about it.

There used to be an old feller came to our house who'd say:

"I cut an' slashed at the forks of this road, an' killed seven men, an' it cost me a thousand dollars." Then he'd shake his head an' say, "But brethren, I never will kill a murdered man."

Mother always said that was just whiskey talk, an' that whiskey had caused more talk than it ever did murders. I guess it caused some love-makin', too, for there used to be a song about a man who was gettin' drunk, that ran:

The bees be lavish, make no store,
The dove become a ranger;
The fallin' waters cease to roar,
Before I'll ever change her.

I'm gettin' in a weavin' way,
I'm gettin' in a weavin' way,
An' when I am in a weavin' way,
I spend my money free.

I drive three horses in my team,
I drive the bay before;
An' it almost breaks my true love's heart
To hear my wagon roar.

Sometimes the whiskey courage that hit the rip-snorters didn't last long. I remember one Saturday when Ray McGonigle was in Paintsville, an' down the street he saw a free-for-all just getting well started.

He was tight as a tick, an' made a bee-line for it, yellin':
"Count McGonigle in this fight."

He didn't know what the fight was about, but then the fellows in the fray didn't any of 'em know which side he was goin' to be on, any more than he did. So just as he got there, one of the battlers caught him a good one, right in the burr of the ear, an' laid him flat of his back in the dirt.

Ray didn't even wait to get up. He just lay there flat, an' yelled: "Count McGonigle out of this fight."

Ray was a Salt River roarer, all right, as long as nobody put up any fight against him. I can still hear the way he used to bellow at the top of his voice:

"Fourteen feet high! Weigh a ton! Wild an' woolly!"

On the word "wild", his voice would go up so high as Tom Brown, the old fiddler, used to say, that "you couldn't reach it with the E-string of a peeanner."

Whiskey wasn't all of it home-made, even in the early days, but you didn't see many of the kind of bottles we have nowadays. Liquor that wasn't made in the mountains was mostly shipped in by the barrel, an' when your jug got empty you could get it filled up again for about three dollars. The liquor varied from nearly clear pure corn to red-eye with a lot of rye used in makin' it.

People tend to call any liquor that is made by moonshiners "rot gut",³⁾ but frankly I never could see that there was so much difference between it an' the product of the commercial stills, except around Dawsonville, Georgia, where they used to put a little concentrated lye in the liquor, to give it an extra kick. That was probably the worst liquor anybody ever made, anywhere, except some of the raisin jack I've seen around Pittsburgh.

When you've once been around an open still, though, it might

be a while before you'll have much appetite for liquor, unless you've got a mighty strong stomach.

Grandpa Stafford used to say, "You can't dirty sorghum nor whiskey, no matter what you do to it." When you've been around a sorghum mill or a moonshine still you'll know what he meant.

The fermenting mash around a still doesn't exactly smell like roses, but after it's boiled, I suppose any germs would just make it more nourishing.

In spite of all that has been written about what terrible people moonshiners and bootleggers are, I've found they don't differ a lot from ordinary people.

I remember one moonshiner, a giant of a man, who lived up in some of the roughest hills I ever saw. By all the stories a man of his size an' business should have been a regular fire-eater, ready to put a rifle bullet into anybody that came around. But this fellow was a mild man, an old bachelor who supported his widowed sister and her nine children.

You do run into some funny things in the mountains, but the dog-gondest I ever saw was a wash-pot still, away back in the hills. Another fellow and I were out in strange country one day when a hard rain came up, an' we took refuge in a cabin, where an old woman sat smokin' a pipe.

She made us welcome, an' we noticed a strong smell like a still, but all we could see was a wood fire in the fire place, under a small wash pot that was covered by a folded blanket.

The rain kept up, an' we talked about this an' that, an' I guess she could see we weren't revenue men, for after while she asked if we'd like a drink.

"Ifn you-all will just help me give this blanket a wring," she added, "I'll get ye some. Hit ain't much of a still, but I ain't got no worm, an' this just has to do."

When she lifted the blanket we figured out at last what she was doin'. She was boilin' the mash in the pot, an' lettin' the blanket catch the steam. She held a pan underneath while we wrung the blanket. We didn't get much out, but it was white lightnin', what there was of it.

"Hit don't give as much liquor as I'd get with a worm," the old woman worried.

My buddy tasted it, an' told me later it wasn't too bad. I'd had a good look at the blanket -- which didn't look like it had been washed in a year -- an' said I was a tee-totaler.

For all whiskey was so common in the hills, I can't remember many more drunks than you're likely to run into anywhere else, back in the old days.

One thing liquor did give our family -- one of our prize stories.

One of the John Swetnams an' a buddy of his named Martin Johnson were out on a bender one night, an' stopped for the night at a tavern of the old school, maybe sixty or seventy years ago.

They were sleepin' in the same bed when Martin had to get up.

It was a hot summer night, an' the window was open, an' Martin hadn't even begun to sober up. So instead of goin' outside, he just headed for the window, which was about what he'd have done if he'd been sober, anyway.

Bein' pretty drunk, though, he wandered around a bit, an'

finally thought he'd bumped his knees into the window sill; but actually he'd got back to the bed, an' he let fly right square in John's face.

John wasn't so drunk but what he woke up sputterin': "Hey, cut that out! Yer pissin' in my eyes!"

Martin went right on, sayin': "Well, John Swetnam, can't you (hic) shut your eyes?"